

Fundamentalist

Marketplace

Semiotics:

A Post-Brand-

ing Forecast /

version 2.2

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Are you a designer doing branding?
Pull the plug.

Are you a student studying branding?
Leave class now.

Are you a lecturer teaching branding?
Put away the PowerPoint.

Cancel the curriculum. Rescind the
industry.

Quit the soul-sucking quicksand
of branding's corporate scheming.

Branding is an insidious neoliberal project wrecking our ability to think straight.

Branding is disabling democracy. The public sphere is colonised, dialogue is simulated and monopolized and the natural environment is monetised. There is no realm of human experience left unmediated by branding.

Branding is the sacred communion of corporations and consumers that has transubstantiated everything, from the connection between governments and citizens, to the trusted conversations between friends, and the whispered declarations between lovers.

Brands are promoted and accepted as legitimate tools to differentiate products and services whose characteristics are typically homogenous. Branding is promoted and accepted as a neutral process when actually there is little it doesn't frame and distort.

It's as if the phenomenon isn't simply a recent opportunistic dogma, but rather some kind of inevitable evolutionary objective.

Hijacked

Research and innovation are being distracted by the substantial resources invested in branding, promised improvements in products and services are deferred while their promotions get sleeker and slipperier, and we're left empty handed, or with fistfuls of literal junk.

The relationship between production and consumption is changing. With neoliberal capitalism, the old forms of value creation in traditional workplaces are replaced with a mediated process of social interaction and communication, converted into economic value via the brand.

Brands aren't just intruding on culture, they now are our culture. They are the sponsored mechanisms for maintaining and constructing meaning and human identity.

Brands don't just want our loyalty, they want our love, they want our soul.

For references and
sources see this
literature review:

[HTTPS://RB.GY/JWKHSD](https://rb.gy/jwkhsd)

The communication industries have been hijacked by branding. Design studios have devolved into branding agencies because the money is easier. Advertising agencies were already fucked. It's not that their work doesn't have real impact, the problem is, it does – they just don't (want to) understand the risks of their fundamentalist marketplace semiotics.

Sordid History

The recent semantic shift from terms like 'design' and 'visual identity' to 'branding' was necessary to define an increasingly dehumanising process. The historical application of the term 'branding' from livestock, slave, prisoner, and then product identification, to the expression of personal values, has a consistent trajectory.

Branding is as much a totalitarian as a totalising ideology, with its authoritarian intolerance of any values existing beyond its grasp. The Swastika and its omnipresent applications in 1930's Germany saw the historical genesis of fully realised systematically programmed, contemporary branding methodology. The field's foundational document, the prototype style guide: *Organisationsbuch der NSDAP* (Organisational Handbook of the National Socialist Party), was a branding blueprint covering every aspect of Nazi public communication.

Branding's popular consolidation was in the first decade of the new millennium, and its pre-eminence came in the wake of the Global Financial Crisis, when previously unshakable faith in free-market superiority was eroded. This newfound ideological insecurity combining with rapidly developing digital technologies was the perfect impetus for the growth of less tangible and more abstract forms of capitalism. Economic data for Europe and the United States shows intangible investment overtook tangible investment in 2008, around the time of the Global Financial Crisis.

The most significant financial assets of many of the world's biggest companies are not their physical products, services and infrastructure, but rather the altogether more nebulous concepts of models, brands and algorithms. All this is by design.

Trojan Horse

Branding's reconstitution of non-corporate entities as market-tamed subordinates is causing real harm. Branding has become an ideological Trojan horse, invading social and cultural realms traditionally resistant to corporate influence.

Branding colonises these spaces, so even radically independent or oppositional agendas are displaced, transformed and debased. Conversely, with corporations' appropriation of social meaning, brands become the medium through which capital is socialised.

Branding, as a form of neoliberal 'common sense' is a site of political struggle.

Exploitation

Brand management is just coercive strategies of intervention in 'consumer freedoms', creating obstacles to exercising and experiencing freedoms "in ways different from those prescribed by the particular ambience." (Arvidsson) A controlled or regulated freedom shapes the context in which freedom is exercised.

Branding is a key form of 'communicative capitalism' (Dean). Instead of exploited labour under industrial capitalism, now any autonomous act of communication has the potential to become free labour that is brandable and transformable into economic value. It is this process which also destroys the meaningfulness of communication. Real political action and transformation is subverted by communicative capitalism exploiting communication. In this sense, abolishing branding is revolutionary.

Branded Away

Branding is now what we call entrenched strategies of aestheticising the concealment of social and political conflict.

To do branding is to obscure and reinforce hierarchies of privilege and class division. This is our complicity in maintaining social inequity, disadvantage, and atomisation.

Branding has breached the last barriers to advertising's voracious environmental and psychological penetration. The heretofore-stubborn evidence of coercive corporate power, of real social and political antagonisms, is hereafter elegantly branded away.

The Air We Breathe

Businesses (and Governments, and others) now look to brands for their internal organising principals. Branding for public interests is not just 'consumer facing', it is internally absorbed and manifested at best as a demoralised in-house culture, and at worst as a debased common good. The cynical advertisements become hallowed mission-statements.

Branding is more proof of capitalism colonising language while taking advantage of its principles. Because the very principle of language will put 'the brand' as a primary signifier in the centre of exchange of meaning between people, 'the brand' and branding seem to be unavoidable. Branding has therefore become naturalised. It seems as natural as the air we breathe, and therefore so difficult to imagine alternatives.

Social Media?

Branding can be a product of debt as a primary instrument of social control. In an indebted world people are forced into a precarious existence. Under these conditions people become 24/7 one wo/man enterprises. The 'entrepreneur of the self' creates her/him self as a brand. Social media exploits this. Facebook, as the biggest advertising medium in human history, is a perfect example. Most Facebook users are carefully curating themselves as brands.

We know someone who said that all people are brands. And that instead of using their names, we should simply refer to them as brands. This person was a Chair of a media and communications department at an Australian university. We also know someone who after being explained that it is important to focus on the social implications of communication, asked: “When you say social, do you mean social media?” This person was Chair of a design department at an Australian university. The strategic damage of advanced capitalism is not only dangerous delusion, but is also stupidity at the expense of knowledge.

Implosions

Communication now has less ‘use value’, and more empty ‘exchange value’. The messages are no longer as important as their circulations.

Under current capitalism, communication implodes because, by definition, communication happens when a message also generates a response. But, increasingly this does not happen. Messages circulate without response in an endless data stream: “zero comment”. But branding remains central to this process; on digital networks, where people self-brand, it is the driver of the messages created. As much as branding tries to persuade us it is the most necessary, important and powerful form of communication, in more and more cases branding happens when communication collapses into itself.

Never-Ending Race

Branding is a product of competition and technology that sees the world as a never-ending race. The more competitive an organisation, the more it employs branding strategies. A fascinating example: we know a university where the head of the university, in any of her public addresses, always wears clothes in the colours of the corporate brand.

You can also recognise these places by their excessive use of the words ‘innovation’ and ‘performance’. In this sense branding is also complicit in the change of one of our primary activities. We don’t work anymore, we perform. We don’t go to workplaces, but to performance centres. No wonder managers and university heads love branding. The modern university also awards academic titles to bureaucrats, administrators and managers. Everything solid belches into branded air.

Exit

Branding is not isolated. It is a product and symptom of capitalism. But creating meaning around signifiers, through a process of meaningful exchange like communication does not have to be predatory. Can we imagine an alternative method of communicating collective identity that supports the common good? Can we abandon the brandwagon? Can we imagine *post-branding*?

Though branders may dismiss it as an ‘activist aesthetic’, we propose post-branding as a new onto-epistemic politics of design and communication. A new set of strategies embedded in a new culture of craft. A new way of being and knowing, for a new relationality with the world.